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SUBJECT: USCIRF MEETING WITH VIETNAMESE VICE FOREIGN MINISTER

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Summary

(SBU) Visiting Commissioners from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) discussed religious freedom, human rights and Vietnam's prisoners of concern with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Vice Minister Pham Binh Minh on October 22. Minh cited positive developments "in all aspects" of the US-Vietnam relationship and said the GVN remains committed to discussing differences on human rights. On the question of recognizing Buddhist sects separate from the State-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), Minh said that the GVN will not allow groups such as the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam to "destroy the unity of the VBS." Individuals the USG regards as prisoners of concern are in jail because they violated Vietnamese law, Minh asserted. USCIRF members rejected Minh's comparison between terrorists in Guantanamo Bay who are determined to kill Americans and those in Vietnam who are arrested for peacefully expressing their political views. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On October 22, four commissioners from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) discussed religious freedom, human rights and Vietnam's prisoners of concern with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Vice Minister Pham Binh Minh. Minh began by citing the positive developments "in all aspects" of the US-Vietnam relationship. He said the GVN "cares about the human rights" of its people and noted that the Vietnamese Constitution guarantees the right to free religious and political expression. Foreign government criticism of the GVN's domestic practices actually "helps us look at how we can improve the lives of our citizens," he added. In this connection, he proudly explained that Vietnamese living standards have increased dramatically over the last 20 years. "It is like in your country in that we, too, are trying to take care of our people," he said.

¶3. (SBU) Minh said that Vietnam has experienced tremendous growth in the number of religious adherents since 1975. He cited statistics that indicate over half of Vietnam's population believes in a religion. If the GVN restricts religious freedom, it is in effect "acting against half the Vietnamese population," he said. It is a GVN policy "to get religious freedom right," he added.

¶4. (SBU) Minh encouraged the delegation to talk to ordinary adherents of Vietnam's varied faiths because "if you talk only to government people, then you get a biased view." He suggested that they attend a Protestant celebration in Thai Binh Province, and if they are in the country on the 15th of the month, to take in a Buddhist "Ve Sak" (full-moon) celebration. USCIRF Chairman Michael Cromartie responded that, in some other countries, government leaders tell USCIRF to listen only to them, not religious figures.

He commended the GVN for its openness in encouraging USCIRF to speak with a broad range of persons and said Minh's encouragement of the delegation to visit the churches, pagodas and mosques of Vietnam is a positive sign.

Vietnam's Buddhists

¶15. (SBU) Commissioner Preeta Bansal commended the GVN for its "foresight" in recognizing different Protestant denominations in Vietnam. She asked if the GVN would demonstrate the same foresight in recognizing Buddhist and Hoa Hao organizations that refuse to fall under the GVN-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) umbrella. Minh responded that the USCIRF should take note of conditions in Vietnam when it talks about the "universality of human rights." Vietnam has its own cultural and economic traditions and the GVN wants to maintain stability, which is why it has required the religious sects to register, he said. He said that the GVN "does not intervene" in the affairs of the VBS and that the GVN will not allow organizations such as the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) to destroy the "unity" of the VBS. Commissioner Bansal responded that allowing groups outside the VBS to register is an "important benchmark" for the commission in evaluating overall religious freedom in Vietnam.

Connecting Religious and Political Freedoms

¶16. (SBU) USCIRF members drew a connection between religious and political freedoms. Commissioner Felice Gaer said that Vietnam will not enjoy full religious freedom until its citizens can freely speak their minds. She appealed for the GVN to release Le Thi Cong Nhan, Nguyen Van Dai, Father Nguyen Van Ly, Thich Quang Do and all other prisoners of concern.

¶17. (SBU) Minh responded saying that every country has its own laws and traditions. Those people who are in prison in Vietnam are there

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because they violated Vietnamese law. Citing the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Minh said the United States has its own ways of dealing with people who are bound and determined to hurt it. Vietnam has its own system of laws and those people who are trying to hurt the Vietnamese state are subject to those laws, the VM said.

USCIRF members rejected Minh's comparison between terrorists in Guantanamo Bay who are determined to kill Americans and those Vietnamese who are in prison for peacefully expressing their political views.

¶18. (SBU) For provincial, district or commune officials who are alleged to have violated central government edicts on religious freedom, the GVN first conducts an investigation, Minh said. Local officials found to have violated religious freedom are punished, and Minh promised the GVN would follow up reports of problems registering Protestant groups in the Central and Northwest Highlands.

¶19. (SBU) In response to USCIRF questions about Vietnam using nebulous national security laws to put people who express political views in prison, Minh said the Vietnamese Constitution allows for freedom of expression. He reiterated that the USCIRF must take into account the situation and traditions of each country when it talks about the universality of human rights. He concluded by pointing out that many people ask him why the United States does not want to discuss the Agent Orange issue in its human rights dialogue with Vietnam.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Minh is one of two MFA officials on the Communist Party of Vietnam's Central Committee (though he is a non-voting alternate member), is the GVN's chief representative in the Human Rights Dialogue with the USG. His extensive experience in defending Vietnam's positions on human rights and religious freedom was clear in this meeting.

11. (U) This message was cleared with USCIRF Chairman Cromartie.

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